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ABSTRACT

A study identified distinguishing characteristics of active older adults who participate in educational activities and measured factors that motivated participation. The dependent variables were participation and nonparticipation; independent variables were educational attainment, anomie, life satisfaction, and certain learning-related factors. A survey instrument was used with 786 older adults in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin. The participants differed statistically from the nonparticipants on each of the independent variables except life satisfaction. Participants averaged slightly above the 12th grade educational level, were less anomic, and were more likely to engage in self-directed learning experiences. Sponsors of educational activities in which they participated were LaFarge Lifelong Learning Institute, local churches, senior centers, and local colleges. Subjects participated in learning activities because they enjoyed being with other people, liked the challenge of learning, and were attracted by the usefulness of the subject matter. Obstacles inhibiting participation were lack of transportation, night classes, uninteresting courses, high cost, and lack of time. (YLB)

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WHAT TURNS OLDER ADULTS ON TO EDUCATION

Research Describing Participation in Educational Activities by Active Older Adults

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by

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The Research Project

The purpose of this study was to identify distinguishing characteristics of active older adults who participate in educational activities and to measure factors which motivated their participation. The dependent variables were participation and nonparticipation; independent variables were educational attainment, anomia, life satisfaction, and certain learning-related factors.

A survey instrument was used with 786 active older adults at 8 different gathering places for seniors in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin.

From a demographic perspective, the subjects may be described according to

Age - 73.6% between 55 and 74;

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20.7% between 55 and 64;

26.3% age 75 and above;

Sex - 78.3% female;

Marital status - 39.3% married; and

Occupational status - 50% high occupational status.

In order to control for age, sex, marital status, and socio-economic status, subjects were grouped according to age, sex, marital status, and occupational status. Participants were then matched with non-participants on the basis of these variables, resulting in groups of 211 participants matched with 211 nonparticipants on the basis of these demographic variables.

Thus each member of the participant group differed from each member of the nonparticipant group in that individual's participation in educational activities. They were matched on the basis of age, sex, marital status, and occupational status, thereby controlling for these variables.

Who Learns?

The participants differed statistically from the nonparticipants on each of the independent variables except life satisfaction; differences were measured in level of educational attainment, anomia, and on such learning-related factors as propensity to engage in self-directed learning, awareness of learning needs, awareness of sites where educational activities were available, etc.

Participants averaged slightly above the 12th grade educational level, whereas the educational level of nonparticipants averaged slightly less than 12th grade. The difference was statistically significant at the .01 level. Twice as many college graduates were among the participants as among the nonparticipants. This finding confirms the findings of other researchers which indicate that prior educational experience is one important factor motivating persons to engage in educational activities (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965).

When measured using the Srole Anomia Scale to assess the level of self-to-others distance or alienation, participants had lower average scores than nonparticipants, statistically significant at the .01 level, indicating that participants were less anomic than nonparticipants. This confirmed the findings of others that an inverse relationship exists between educational participation and an individual's sense of alienation or powerlessness (Seeman, 1963). This particular measure was used with this population in order to probe possible consequences of powerlessness or self-to-others distance resulting from the role change which affects older adults to varying degrees.

The only variable measuring no difference between participants and nonparticipants was life satisfaction, using the Life Satisfaction Index A. While participants indicated a slightly higher level of life satisfaction than nonparticipants, the difference between the two groups was not statistically

significant at the .05 level.

A six-item scale was developed in order to gauge the subjects' propensity to engage in self-directed learning experiences. Participants were more likely than nonparticipants to engage in self-directed learning activities, the difference between the two groups being statistically significant at the .01 level.

Participants also differed significantly from nonparticipants in their ability to list places where educational activities were available to them. Participants averaged 1.49 places, whereas nonparticipants averaged .41 places, a difference significant at the .01 level, suggesting different levels of awareness with regard to the availability of educational services.

Similarly, participants were able to identify more topics about which they would be interested to learn than were nonparticipants. The average response of participants, .63 topics, differed from the average response of nonparticipants, .26 topics, significantly at the .01 level, again suggesting different levels of awareness with regard to the subjects' own learning needs.

Using a regression analysis to assess the relative influence of these independent variables on the dependent variable, participation, it was found that the ability to list places where educational activities were available and the propensity of the

subjects to engage in self-directed learning activities accounted for 28.7% of the total variance within the dependent variable. Level of educational attainment accounted for an additional .26%, topics for learning, .22%, and anomia and life satisfaction together accounted for .27%. These independent variables together accounted for 29.45% of the variance in the dependent variable.

What do they learn?

The topics of educational activities in which subjects participated included Bible study, current issues and events, history, crafts, religion, music, creative writing, gourmet cooking, sewing, wood carving, macrame, and others. Many of those listed are names of courses and others are more general subject areas.

Topics about which subjects expressed an interest to learn more included crafts, painting, sewing, self-improvement skills, music, current issues, history, foreign languages, and art. Approximately 62% of the participants and 81% of the nonparticipants failed to identify any topics about which they would be interested to learn.

Where do they learn?

Sponsors of educational activities in which subjects most frequently participated include LaFarge Lifelong Learning

Institute, local churches and religious organizations, Milwaukee Area Technical College, various senior centers, and the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee and Extension. Approximately 34% of the participants and 76% of the nonparticipants failed to identify any places where educational activities were available.

Why do they learn?

Subjects gave the following reasons for their participation in learning activities: 83.9% indicated they enjoyed being with other people; 79.6% liked the challenge of learning; and 68.2% were attracted by the usefulness of the subject matter.

Subjects were also aware of obstacles which frequently inhibited participation. Those most frequently listed were lack of transportation, classes held at night, notion that people can learn by themselves, uninteresting courses, high cost of courses, lack of time, and the belief that older people don't need to learn. Other obstacles suggested include apathy, health problems or physical handicaps, and activities which are held in dangerous or unsafe areas. Participants were much more aware of these potentially inhibiting obstacles than were nonparticipants, the difference being significant at the .01 level.

What conclusions may be drawn?

There were basic differences between participants and nonparticipants among the active older adult subjects:

One may infer from these findings that participation is related to prior educational experiences, confidence in relationship with others, propensity to engage in self-directed learning activities, awareness of the availability of educational programs, and interest in topics for future learning. Each of these except prior educational experiences is susceptible to direct or indirect manipulation by educators with older adults at the program level. These findings suggest the need for programs which capitalize on the employment of self-directed learning activities as well as programs which develop skills in building dependable relationships with others. The findings also present the need of this client population for a broadened awareness of educational opportunities which are available to them as well as the need to increase the level of sensitivity to their own learning deprivation which may be met through educational programs.

On occasion, the low level of participation by older adults in educational activities has been attributed to age or lack of positive prior educational experiences. While research findings generally support those conclusions, the findings of this study suggest most of the differences between participants and nonparticipants may be considered in the planning and implementation of educational programs for older adults. Instead of pointing the adult educator to a better educated older adult clientele, this study affirms the importance of the adult educator in using that difference as the basis for future program development (Fisher, pp. 152, 153).

Certain factors did provide a stronger influence on the participation variable than others:

One may infer that predictors of educational participation are more strongly associated with the influence of factors in the learning situation itself on the potential participant than in the experience and/or attitude of the potential participant. The implication of such an inference is to affirm the significant of development and presentation of educational opportunities which engage the attention of the older adult and meet needs which the older adult can identify as belonging to him/her....an important task of the educator is education or consciousness-raising about education (Fisher, pp. 157, 158).

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